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ABSTRACT

The transition to junior high school can be a positive step toward increasing maturity, and a stressful period of adaptation as well. To investigate the contribution of friendships to children's adjustment after the transition to junior high school, students (N=101) from four elementary schools were tested during the spring of sixth grade, in the fall of seventh grade at the junior high school, and in the spring of seventh grade. Measures of adjustment, self-esteem, school attitudes, and friendships were obtained from structured questionnaires, individual interviews, teacher ratings, and school records. Scores on the Perceived Competence Scale, social self-esteem subscale, decreased significantly after the transition to junior high school, and did not increase between fall and spring of seventh grade. Attitudes toward school as measured by the Classroom Environment Scale also decreased during the transition and did not improve in later testing. Student responses to open-ended questions about their feelings toward junior high improved from spring of sixth grade to fall of seventh grade. Although students reported fewer close friendships after the transition than before, the quality of student friendships seemed to increase after the transition. There were no significant correlations between friendship stability and the measures of adjustment, but there were significant correlations between measures of friends' contact and closeness and measures of adjustment. The findings suggest that the formation of close friendships during the early part of seventh grade could contribute to students' adjustment. Thirteen references are listed. (NRB)

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The Effects of Friendships on Students' Adjustment after the Transition to Junior High School

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The Effects of Friendships on Students' Adjustment after the Transition to Junior High School

The transition to junior high school can be viewed very positively, as another step toward adulthood and a sign of adolescents' increasing maturity. This transition may be stressful, however, because it is accompanied by many changes that require corresponding adaptations on the part of students. Typically, junior high schools are larger and different in organization than elementary schools. Students interact with a greater variety of teachers and take courses in a wider range of subjects. Moreover, disciplinary practices and rules are likely to be different from those in elementary school. Teachers are likely to expect more of students, because they perceive the students as more mature.

The problems of adjustment after the transition to junior high school were described most dramatically by Roberta Simmons and her colleagues (Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg, 1973) in a study published roughly a decade ago with the title, "Disturbance in the self-image at adolescence." Simmons reported dramatic decreases in self-esteem around the age of 12 years. Subsequent analyses of the data indicated that the decreases occurred for 12-year-olds in junior high school, but not for 12-year-olds who were still in elementary school. Simmons speculated that the transition to junior high was difficult for adolescents. Adolescents new to junior high school felt unsure of themselves and self-conscious. Apparently, adolescents became accustomed to junior high after some time,

because their self-esteem levels increased between the ages of 12 and 18.

In a later study by Simmons (Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979), the transition to junior high was associated with decreases in self-esteem for girls, but not for boys. In a still later study by Harter (1982), self-esteem was no lower for junior-high students than for elementary students. The stability of individual differences in students' perceived cognitive competence, or their perceptions of their academic achievement, was low after the transition, but the students' mean levels of perceived cognitive competence did not decline. These findings suggest that the junior-high transition is not always stressful for adolescents. Apparently, there are substantial differences between students in their adjustment after the transition. There may also be varying patterns of changes for different measures of adjustment.

The newer data on the junior-high transition are consistent with one repeated finding in a vast literature on stress and coping among adults (see Thoits, 1983). In general, events that happen at expected times to all individuals in a particular group cause less stress than events that occur unexpectedly and to some individuals but not others. That is, normative transitions are less stressful than nonnormative transitions. For example, the normative transition of retirement is generally less stressful than the nonnormative transition of being fired.

Nevertheless, there are great individual differences in reactions to normative transitions. The adult literature on stress

and coping suggests that one major determinant of these individual differences is the social support available to a person experiencing a potentially stressful event (see Heller & Swindle, 1984). In the literature, social support usually refers to close personal relationships from which people derive advice, material aid, and a sense of themselves as cared for, esteemed, and loved (Cobb, 1976). Individuals with such relationships are generally more satisfied with life and they less often become depressed following a serious loss or disappointment (Brown & Harris, 1978; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968).

For adolescents, friendships are likely to constitute a major source of social support. Several decades ago, this hypothesis was presented in different terms by Harry Stack Sullivan (1953). He proposed that friendships first become intimate in later childhood or early adolescence. At this time, adolescents start to share their most private thoughts and feelings with their friends. During their conversations, adolescents learn that they are valued by their friends, which enhances their self-esteem. Adolescents also learn that their friends have thoughts and feelings like their own, which helps them recognize that their thoughts and feelings are not bizarre or unique. Sullivan further proposed that adolescents' friendships are marked by a high degree of sensitivity and mutual responsiveness. Adolescents care about their friends' needs and desires; they try to choose activities and behaviors that will increase the mutual satisfaction of themselves and the friends.

The findings of recent empirical research are largely consistent

with Sullivan's hypotheses. Adolescents are more likely than elementary-school children to mention their sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings with friends (Berndt, 1982; Youniss, 1980). Under conditions that encourage competition, adolescents are more likely to share equally with friends than younger children (Berndt, in press). In addition, adolescents describe friendship as an egalitarian relationship, one in which each person acts to maintain or restore the equality between them, more than younger children (Youniss, 1980).

The recent evidence suggests that friendships can function as social supports for adolescents. Thus friendships may play an important role in adjustment following a potentially stressful event such as a school transition. The contribution of friendships to children's adjustment after the transition to junior high school was the focus of a study that was planned and carried out by my co-author and I. Before describing the study in greater detail, I would like to provide anecdotal evidence for our major hypothesis about the influence of friendships on adolescents' adjustment.

We interviewed children individually during the spring of sixth grade, before they made the transition to junior high. Near the end of the interview, we asked them the following question, "How do you feel about moving from this school to the junior high school?" One student responded, "I'm nervous--we're going to have all new teachers, and I know I'm going to get lost. I will know people there but I'll still be nervous my first day. I'll be the little 7th grader, the newcomer to the school." She went on to describe

the things that she did not like about moving to the new school, saying, "I'm scared to death about whether the teachers will be nice, the homework situation. I'm scared about the kids that I'm not going to know, that are coming from other schools. Mary (her best friend) isn't going to my school. I'll be all by myself. I sort of want to be by myself, but I'm nervous starting out a new school without a best friend right there with me."

By contrast, one boy said he felt good about moving to junior high school. When asking what he liked about moving, he said, "Meeting new friends," and "Having some of my friends move there with me." He did have one thing he did not like about moving. He knew they would have lockers for the first time, and he said he was worried about memorizing his locker combination.

The sixth-graders' responses illustrate that they viewed friendships as critical to their adjustment to the new school. The responses further suggest that school transitions are stressful partly because they lead to changes in friendship. On the other hand, the boys' comments indicate that moving to junior high is not viewed as stressful by all sixth graders.

In this talk, I will emphasize three questions that can be addressed with the data collected. First, was the transition to junior high stressful for the <u>ave.age</u> sixth grader in the study? Were there changes over time in the students' responses that suggest an initial period of disorientation followed by a period of adjustment to the new school? Second, how did the school transition affect the children's friendships? How unstable were their

elementary school friendships and how quickly did they form close friendships in the new school? Third, was the stability of the students' old friendships, or the support derived from their new friendships, associated with the adjustment to the new school?

Method

The study included 101 students from four different elementary schools. A first group of sixth graders was recruited during the spring of 1982; a second group was recruited from the same school system during the spring of 1983. I will refer to these groups as the first and second cohorts, respectively.

After the initial assessment during the spring of sixth grade, all students were seen again during the following fall, when they were in the seventh grade in the junior high school. The students were seen for a final time during the spring of seventh grade. Thus the study had a longitudinal design with three assessments spread over a one-year period.

Various measures of adjustment were obtained from structured questionnaires, teachers' ratings, and school records. For this talk, I will focus on three measures. First, the students' self-esteem was measured with the Perceived Competence Scale developed by Susan Harter (1982). This measure includes subscales for perceived competence in cognitive pursuits, social relationships, and physical activities like sports, as well as a general self-esteem scale. Second, the students' attitudes toward school were measured with subscales from the Classroom Environment Scale devised by Moos and Trickett (1974). In the study, the

subscales for involvement in classroom activities, affiliation with other students, and support from teachers were used. Third, the students' overall attitude toward the school transition were assessed by means of the open-ended questions that I quoted earlier. After students answered the open-ended question, they were asked to describe what they liked and disliked about junior high school. We coded the answers to these questions into sets of categories that I will describe later.

The features of the children's friendships were explored during an in-depth, individual interview. Each student was asked first to name his or her best friends. Then they were asked a standard series of questions about each of their three closest friendships. For example, they were asked how often they and their friend talked about things that they wouldn't tell most other people. After they indicated the frequency of such intimate conversations, they were asked to describe generally what they talked about and why they discussed such personal matters with each other. Besides the set of questions on intimate self-disclosure, there were questions on the friends' sharing, arguing, and competition with each other. Other questions concerned the friends' faithfulness to each other, their similarity, their knowledge of each other, and their exclusiveness or their preference to do things as a pair rather than with a group of other kids. Finally, the children were asked several specific questions about the frequency of their contact or interaction with their friends. For example, they were asked how often they went places together.

From the students' responses, multiple measures of friendship were obtained. I will focus on four measures. The first measure is the stability of the students' friendships between any two times of measurements. Friendship stability was estimated by the proportion of a student's three closest friends at one time who were still among their three closest friends at the next time. Stability estimates were calculated for the transition period itself, that is, from the spring of sixth grade to the fall of seventh grade, and for the posttransition period from the fall to the spring of seventh grade. The second measure was derived from the students' responses to the open-ended questions about each feature of friendship, for example, their comments about why they did or did not have intimate conversations with their friends. These responses were rated on a 1--5 scale, with higher ratings for answers indicating a closer or more satisfying relationship. The third measure was a mean score for the frequency of contact with friends, based on the students' responses to the set of questions about contact. The final measure was the number of close friends that children mentioned. We expected the measures of closeness and contact to relate most strongly to adolescents' adjustment, because these measures illustrate the degree of social support that the adolescents perceive in their friendships.

Results

In presenting the results, I will concentrate first on the measures of school adjustment. Did scores on the measures of adjustment decrease immediately following the transition? The

answer is a qualified "yes." On the Harter measure of self-esteem (Table 1), scores decreased significantly after the transition to junior high on only one subscale, that for social self-esteem. One explanation for this effect is suggested by the items themselves, which refer to how many friends a child has and how hard it is for him or her to make friends. In a new, large, junior high school, making friends is likely to be more of a challenge than in an elementary school with a small number of classrooms at each grade. Worth noting, however, is the lack of an increase in social self-esteem between the fall and the spring of seventh grade. Adjustment to junior high school apparently takes more than a few weeks, perhaps even more than the seventh-grade year.

Attitudes toward school as measured by the Classroom Environment Scale also declined after the transition (Table 2). The decline was significant for all three subscales: involvement in class activities, affiliation with other students, and support from teachers, but the effect for teacher support held only in the first cohort. Moreover, attitudes did not improve substantially between the fall and the spring of seventh grade. The mean scores for involvement actually decreased most over this period.

By contrast, students' responses to the open-ended question about their feelings toward junior high improved from the spring of sixth grade to the fall of seventh grade. Recall that these questions referred specifically to attitudes toward junior high school. The sixth-graders' responses thus reflect expectations rather than experience. After entering the new school, the students

felt junior high was not as bad as they had expected. Nevertheless, their responses to the Classroom Environment Scale indicate that they were not as satisfied with the new school, even by the end of seventh grade, as they had been with their old school.

When asked specifically what they liked about junior high school, adolescents gave a variety of answers (Table 3). I will focus on the significant changes in these responses over time. In sixth grade, before the move to junior high school, adolescents emphasized the chance to make new friends, and their excitement about having a novel school setting. They also made the greatest number of miscellaneous positive comments when in sixth grade. In other words, idiosyncratic or unusual comments about the benefits of moving to junior high were most common before the move occurred. After the move, most positive comments fell into the more standard categories.

In the fall of seventh grade, a couple of months after the move, students emphasized their liking for the new school organization, and their enjoyment of the increased responsibility that they had in junior high. In the spring, students less often said they liked the way the school was organized--apparently, the novelty had worn off--but other categories of positive comments were stated roughly as often as in the fall.

When asked what they disliked about junior high school, students gave responses that largely fell into the same categories as for positive comments (Table 4). Negative comments about friendship, usually referring to the expected loss of old friends, were most

frequent in the spring of sixth grade. Negative comments about peers, which included comments about hostile behavior by classmates and victimization by older students, also were most common before the move. Finally, just as students were intrigued by the novelty of a new school, they were somewhat afraid of the new environment before the move.

Shortly after the move, students expressed the most dislike for their specific classes, the amount and difficulty of their academic work, the school organization, and the rules in the school. These aspects of the school experience were less often mentioned as sources of dislike by the spring of seventh grade, but dislike for teachers was mentioned most in the spring. Apparently, students began to focus their discontent on teachers to a greater degree as the year progressed.

The adolescents' friendships were also affected by the school transition, as expected. On the average, about half of the students' friendships in the spring of sixth grade remained close friendships by the fall of seventh grade. Surprisingly, friendship stability was no higher between the fall and the spring of seventh grade; the proportion of stable friendships remained about .5.

Students also reported fewer close friends after the transition than before it (Table 5). Between the fall and the spring of seventh grade, the students' mean number of close friends decreased still further.

By contrast, the quality of the students' friendships seemed to increase rather than decrease after the transition. The rating for

the closeness of students' friendships, based on the mean rating across all features of friendship, changed little between the spring of sixth grade and the fall of seventh grade, but it increased significantly by the spring of seventh grade. In other words, the friendships formed by the end of seventh grade were viewed as more intimate, more mutually responsive, based on greater similarity, and so on, than the friendships that the students had in sixth grade or the early months of seventh grade. Similarly, reported contact with friends changed little between the spring of sixth grade and the fall of seventh grade, but contact increased greatly by the spring of seventh grade.

These findings suggest that friendships were affected by the school transition, but they may also have been affected by the students' social development during the seventh-grade year. In other words, the increases in contact and satisfaction that were apparent by the end of seventh grade may be due to some combination of increasing maturity and the chance in a new school for new friendships with students having very similar interests. Alternatively, students who lost old friends, either immediately after the transition or during the seventh grade year, may have formed closer friendships with their remaining friends. More definite conclusions about the reasons for the changes in friendships will be possible after a more complete review of all the data.

The final question in the study was how the children's friendships affected their adjustment to the new school. This

question could also be reversed: How did the students' adjustment affect their friendships? Definitive tests of either hypothesis are difficult in a nonexperimental study, even when data are gathered longitudinally. Causal modeling techniques will be used with these data eventually. For today, I will focus on the zero-order correlations between the measures of friendship and adjustment. The first important finding was the lack of significant correlations between friendship stability and the measures of adjustment. The stability of old friendships is apparently not an important factor in adjustment after a school transition. There were significant correlations between the measures of adjustment and the measures of friends' contact and closeness. For example, adolescents who saw their friends more often had higher social self-esteem (Table 6). The correlations suggest bidirectional influence: students who had more contact with friends at Time 1 had higher social self-esteem at Time 2 and 3, and vice versa.

Similarly, adolescents who had closer friendships had higher scores on the subscale for school attitudes that refers to affiliation among students (Table 7). These correlations also suggest bidirectional influences: students with closer friendships at Time 1 viewed affiliation among students more positively at Times 2 and 3, and vice versa.

Conclusion

Taken together, the results are consistent with the primary hypothesis that friendships can serve as social supports for children making the transition to a new school. The junior-high

transition is not stressful for all children, but many children express anxiety about the changes they will experience. The transition does not affect all indices of school adjustment; children seem most concerned about the changes in their friendships. The changes in adjustment and in friendship that occur during the year following the transition are not always consistent. Although adolescents report lower perceived social competence after the transition, they also indicate that they have formed closer friendships. Nevertheless, the closeness of adolescents' friendships is associated with their social adjustment before and after the transition to junior high. These findings suggest that promoting the formation of close friendships during the early part of seventh grade could contribute to an overall increase in students' adjustment. Research on an intervention of this type would be a valuable supplement to this research on the consequences of a school transition.

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Table 1

Mean Scores for Each Subscale of the

Perceived Competence Scale at Each Time

Subscale	Time		
	Spring-Sixth	Fall-Seventh	Spring-Seventh
Social	3.10	2.98	2.98
Cognitive	2.82	2.76	2.74
Physical	2.80	2.69	2.73
General	2.91	2.89	2.85

Table 2

Mean Scores for Each Measure

of School Attitudes at Each time

Measure	Time		
	Spring-Sixth	Fall-Seventh	Spring-Seventh
Revised CES Scale			
Involvement	.57	.55	.51
Affiliation	.71	.66	.67
Teacher support	.48	.44	.41
Open-ended question	.99	1.41	1.42

Table 3

Mean Scores for Each Category of Positive Comments about School at Each Time

Category	Time			
	Spring-Sixth	Fall-Seventh	Spring-Seventh	Sign.
Friendship	.55	.15	.19	$p < .001$
Peer relationships	.31	.25	.36	ns
Teachers	.23	.33	.38	$p < .10$
Classes	.19	.31	.19	$p < .10$
Academic work/difficulty	.07	.18	.14	$p < .10$
School organization	.63	1.06	.58	$p < .001$
School rules	.06	.10	.12	ns
Novelty	.17	.01	.01	$p < .001$
Responsibility	.12	.26	.28	$p < .01$
Miscellaneous	.26	.11	.10	$p < .01$

Table 4

Mean Scores for Each Category of Negative Comments about School at Each Time

Category	Time			
	Spring-Sixth	Fall-Seventh	Spring-Seventh	Sign.
Friendship	.33	.04	.01	$p < .001$
Peer relationships	.16	.06	.10	$p < .05$
Teachers	.31	.31	.48	$p < .01$
Classes	.05	.19	.08	$p < .01$
Academic work/difficulty	.19	.38	.30	$p < .05$
School organization	.22	.43	.32	$p < .05$
School rules	.05	.27	.22	$p < .001$
Novelty	.28	.02	.00	$p < .001$
Miscellaneous	.17	.08	.10	$p < .10$

Table 5

Mean Scores for Three Measures of Friendship at Each Time

Measure	Time		
	Spring-Sixth	Fall-Seventh	Spring-Seventh
Number of close friends	2.94	2.70	2.47
Closeness rating	3.18	3.15	3.32
Amount of contact	8.67	8.85	9.37

Table 6

Correlations of Perceived Competence with Contact between Friends at Each Time and Across Time

Perceived Competence Scale	Friends' Contact		
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Time 1			
Social	.28**	.20*	.23*
Cognitive	.05	.16	.22*
Physical	.11	.05	.13
General	-02	.05	.08
Time 2			
Social	.20*	.18	.06
Cognitive	.00	.22*	.12
Physical	.12	.04	.09
General	.06	.11	.08
Time 3			
Social	.27*	.19	.22*
Cognitive	.13	.12	.13
Physical	.13	.00	.13
General	.04	.04	.12

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 7

Correlations of School Attitudes with Closeness of Friendship at Each Time and Across Time

Revised CES Scales	Friends' Closeness		
Time 1	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Affiliation	.26**	.32**	.19
Involvement	.18	.13	.22*
Teacher Support	-.04	.00	.03
Time 2			
Affiliation	.25*	.12	.13
Involvement	.10	-.05	.00
Teacher Support	-.03	.03	-.06
Time 3			
Affiliation	.26**	.31**	.26**
Involvement	.12	.04	-.04
Teacher Support	-.04	-.08	-.02

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$